



**Building
Consensus
Toward a**

SHARED PURPOSE

A Profile of President David Gray

BY ALAN DESSOFF



One might say that David Gray's path into higher education facilities management was anything but traditional. Today, Gray is the assistant vice president of facilities services at Middle Tennessee State University. His professional career, however, actually began in banking. In 1993 he was working in Murfreesboro Tennessee. As a local banker and president of the Chamber of Commerce, he had become familiar with Middle Tennessee State University. It was MTSU's vice president of business and finance, Duane Stucky, who introduced Gray to the idea of working in higher education and ultimately in facilities management. The banking business was in flux, and "I felt I needed a career change," Gray says.

Gray was subsequently presented the opportunity to work at MTSU in various aspects of auxiliary management and facilities operations. A year or so later he transitioned into the

position of director of facility services – later upgraded to the assistance vice president position he holds today. It was during this time of transition when Gray was strongly encouraged to get involved in APPA.

Gray's introduction to APPA began with a professional connection with the University of Missouri-Columbia and Alan Warden, then vice chancellor of facilities and an active APPA member. This connection was the genesis for a serious facilities management education marked by peer-to-peer mentoring and exposure to various APPA technical programs. Gray credits Warden with getting him involved quickly and thoroughly in APPA. "I started going to APPA meetings. I'd have breakfast with Al, then go to sessions with Al, then have lunch with Al. He was the only person I knew in APPA at the time and I got to know him real well," says Gray.



“I remember him well,” says Warden, now retired in Columbia, adding that he thought Gray showed promise in his new field.

“APPA does a great job with its training programs,” Gray continues, “and I knew I had to take some of these programs to get up to speed. I knew a little about life—I wasn’t a young person starting in this business—but I needed to know what other people in the facilities business were doing, and how this thing worked. I went to classes and studied and got the technology side of what I needed to know from APPA’s training.”

His platform as APPA’s President-Elect stated that he would center on “a strong commitment to continue the technical, knowledge-based educational program offerings” of APPA with “a focus on equipping facilities professionals and personnel in the areas of leadership and communications—leading to increased credibility and greater influence within the critical decision-making processes on campus.”

MORE WITH LESS

Gray put what he was learning through APPA to work at MTSU, where he began with a staff of about 200 on a campus with some 17,000 students. Today he has about 170 employees responsible for maintenance, operations, and construction activities on a campus with 26,000 students and a footprint of 4.9 million square feet.

He has fewer in-house employees, he says, because the economy has led him to outsource custodial duties. “People laugh about doing more with less. We just find better ways to do it, and we have good people. We work smart,” he explains.

Gray sees economic problems underscoring the overall state of facilities management these days. “We’re all hurting right

now. Many of our schools are state schools, and states that are short on money are making budget cuts. It’s tough. It’s all about stewardship,” he declares.

“We have more resources to work with in the way of technology, with all that information out there about best practices, and we can talk with each other much more easily and go online and find help. But we have a problem with the economics. When there is a budget reduction, facilities services must take our fair share. We find the best ways to do things. This includes efficiency and productivity improvements. Many times, some form of service reduction is required. This is always done in a thoughtful way focusing on the university priorities.” For example, Gray says, “It used to be that trash was emptied every night on our campus. Now, we still do the classrooms, general areas, and suite areas nightly, but offices are emptied once a week – including my own.”

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FOCUS ON THE MISSION

While economic realities have had an impact on facilities services, Gray commends the administrative and academic leadership at MTSU for their management of the university during difficult times. This is perhaps best illustrated in the *Positioning the University for the Future* initiative commissioned by MTSU president Dr. Sidney McPhee. This initiative sharpened the focus on the university’s mission, reinforced priorities, and evaluated operations and services across the campus for effectiveness and best value. A strategic plan emerged that sets the direction for all campus departments including facilities. Gray works closely with senior vice president John Cothorn to resource and execute the facilities portion of the strategic plan as well as the day-to-day operations. Gray feels that when decisions are made they are supported – particularly the tough ones.



When he started at MTSU, Gray says, “We did a lot of things for everybody and didn’t charge them, even if it really didn’t fall under the umbrella of maintenance. If somebody wanted a bookcase built in their office, we just went over and built it and didn’t charge for it. Now, if it’s something not in the purview of maintenance and operations, we have to charge for it. We don’t make a profit; we call it full-cost recovery. That’s working smart. We can’t subsidize others.

“Auxiliaries like food services, parking, the post office, are supposed to stand on their own. As a state institution, we can’t spend our maintenance and operation dollars to subsidize things like that. We run it like a business and make sure we spend the dollars the best way we can.”

Gray adds that MTSU is 100 years old and the average age of its buildings is 47 years. “We’re a young campus compared to a lot of others, but we ask a lot of our buildings,” he says. He remembers what an APPA colleague at another school once said about that: “What do you call a hundred-year-old building? I call it new.”

STEWARDS OF OUR TIME

While he and other APPA members address the impact of the economy on their campuses, Gray wants to be sure they have the best resources available

through APPA, including using the full capabilities of the Internet. “When we used to talk about social networking, we usually meant going out to play golf or have a drink. Now, it’s people talking to each other on the Internet. We have more information

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The MTSU facilities leadership team. Clockwise, from David Gray, c: Joe Whitefield, J. Wallace, Kelly Ostergrant, Reggie Floyd, and Gerald Caudill.

at our fingertips and I believe that technology-wise, we have more going for us right now that we've had in a long time. We have more information at our fingertips, more ways to communicate with one another and find the best practices and how to implement them into what we're doing at our facilities."

That's where APPA's membership demographics play a role, he maintains, including seeking younger members and getting them involved. He talks of "reverse mentoring—learning from somebody who knows how to use the latest technology. And this technology is changing like crazy."

"If you go to one of our caucuses, you'll see a lot of gray-haired guys sitting around. But we're just stewards of our time. The young people have to take over after us," he says. He notes that APPA's Strategic Plan for 2011-2014 addresses that by calling for development and implementation of plans to "create, engage, and replenish a future generation of leaders." Gray calls them "emerging facilities professionals" and says he has hired some "very good, young, professional engineers" on his campus.

While it's important to mentor younger members to become involved in APPA and become leaders, as Warden helped him, Gray says peer mentoring also is vital to maintain APPA's membership regardless of age levels. "We can come up with a lot of programs and do a lot of marketing, publications, e-mail, all sorts of things, but the way to grow our numbers is to talk to one another," he explains. "It's hard to do, because we're busy people, and it's hard to pick up the phone and talk to someone, or e-mail them, and say 'I appreciated seeing you at the last meeting and

hopefully you'll come to the next one.' We have to make sure they don't drop out of sight."

SUCCESSION PLANS

Gray, who turns 63 at the end of this year, says it's important to have a succession plan and he has one at MTSU. "I have a person in place who could take my place. He's progressing and getting up to speed," Gray says.

He is talking about Joe Whitefield, his executive director, who has worked with Gray at MTSU for 12 years. What he likes about Gray, Whitefield says, is that "he is an outstanding manager and leader, although he comes about it in a different way than you might expect in a facilities organization. You think of engineers with pocket protectors, that kind of stuff, and I am one." But Gray, with his banking background, and before that in the electrical wholesaling business, knows management and leadership,

Whitefield says. "He hires good people, he works to develop a form of trust with them so he can let them do their jobs. He's involved in everything but he's not a micro-manager. But he's always learning, studying, bringing new thinking. He asks a lot of questions, like 'What's a better way to do this?'"

"He hires very good individuals and his units respond quickly. When we have a problem, we call and usually get something in motion within a day. For higher ed, that's pretty amazing," adds K. Watson Harris, who manages space issues for the MTSU provost and academic affairs. "We're in different divisions that typically are at odds, but David and I have

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not been. He's an easygoing guy. I play golf with him. Even during bad golf games, he's pretty good," she says.

In addition to golf—he plays with about a 14 handicap, Gray says—he likes shooting sporting clays, fly-fishing, and reading nonfiction. A native Tennessean, he holds a business degree in marketing and regional urban planning development from East Tennessee State University. He and his wife, Ellen, have been married 40 years. They have no children but adopted two kittens, a brother and sister, from a local pound. Because they have markings like bulls-eyes on their sides, Gray calls them Smith and Wesson, after the gun manufacturer.

APPA—AN OPPORTUNITY

Once he became comfortable with APPA, Gray began working his way up the leadership ranks as TNAPPA president, SRAPPA secretary-treasurer and representative to the APPA Education Committee, and APPA vice president for professional development before becoming president-elect. He received the "Unsung Hero" award for SRAPPA in 2009 and the APPA President's Award in 2010. He has authored articles for *Facilities Manager* and given presentations and participated in educational programs at many state, regional, and international APPA conferences.

Gray is excited about the opportunity his APPA presidency provides to underscore the importance of effective leadership in facilities management. "All of us are doing the same kind of thing. It's unbelievable how much in assets we're responsible for at our universities. We manage the people behind the scenes on our campuses, and to be able to make everything work, we have to be really conscious of what we're doing and how we're doing it. We have to be good stewards," he says.

He would like to elevate leadership in a different way at APPA's annual conferences by bringing in "the best people" from other industries as keynote informative and inspirational speakers. APPA tried that once, he says, "and then the economy hit us," and he

knows he won't be able to return to the practice during his term because of budget issues. Top speakers from outside "cost a lot of money," he says, but he would like to lay the groundwork to resume it in the future.

Meanwhile, there are other items on his agenda, including prioritizing the new strategic plan. "We'll stay focused on the priority items and try to get them accomplished," he says, also citing the APPA Thought Leaders Series publications that outline the challenges facilities managers face. "Some issues are technical in nature and some are managerial," Gray says. "We need to take another look at ourselves and determine what the most important things are."

He looks forward to the support of APPA's other volunteer leaders to help do that. "We have such good people in APPA who have volunteered and given so much. That's one of our key strengths. The old cliché is 'you get out of it what you put into it,' and I'm going to put a lot into it," Gray concludes. ☺

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